



Building Great Engineers: Creatively Mentoring Company Grade Officers

By Captain Robert R. Phillipson

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are often referred to as “company commanders’ wars.” Although some of these commanders are prepared for the challenges they will face in combat, others are not. We must have trained, capable engineer leaders in these positions to ensure our success. The Engineer Branch functions across the spectrum of Army operations, and as such we represent our branch to senior maneuver officers. An engineer’s ability to analyze tactical problems and identify solutions can be a great asset to a brigade combat team (BCT) or battalion staff. A solid foundation in doctrine and tactics will lead to the employment of our young sappers to their full potential. So how do we best train and prepare company grade officers for their assigned duties and prepare them to interact with the maneuver leaders to provide them optimal engineer support?

Challenges

Young lieutenants and captains today face a number of challenges when arriving at their first company. For example, they probably will not get a fully-manned platoon or company or a property book with correct shortage annexes. Many of their subordinate leaders will have less than a month or two in their current grade or duty position. Within the first 90 days, some of those subordinate leaders will leave the Army or change stations. Critically, most of

their subordinate leaders will be behind the normal timeline for the Noncommissioned Officer Education System, whether for the Warrior Leader Course, Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course, or Advanced Noncommissioned Officer Course. The company commander may have served in a construction battalion or held a job in the United States Army Corps of Engineers before being assigned to a heavy BCT and will face challenges understanding how to establish a training plan in preparation for combat. The United States Army’s current operational tempo challenges leaders daily, and they find themselves struggling with time and resource management. Strategies to solve these problems come from cooperative interactions between leaders and subordinates and a calculated professional development plan on the part of raters and senior raters.

Effective Leadership

Some leaders are blessed with the charisma required to lead and influence sappers, while others require the support of their duty titles to accomplish these tasks. Observe leaders you serve with, adopt their positive traits, and try them within your own organizations. Encourage subordinate leaders to do the same. One of the reasons General of the Army George C. Marshall was a successful organizer and tactician was that he continuously applied different solutions to problems in a training environment

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and optimized how the task was accomplished. His leaders gave him the flexibility to try new solutions to problems and learn from the results he achieved. His successes in expanding his capabilities were only achieved through time and a supportive chain of command. The larger share of coaching time should be devoted to the technical and tactical aspects of the profession of arms. Effective leadership results when subordinates have institutional knowledge and are unencumbered by the tactical and administrative aspects of their assigned positions. Also, since subordinates represent their organization when attached to maneuver units, it is critical that they understand how they are integrated into maneuver planning and execution.

“Officers must know how to think clearly about problems of the battlefield without being entangled with elaborate techniques of leadership to be effective.”¹

—General of the Army George C. Marshall

Commanders are responsible for training themselves and their subordinates in the challenging environment of military service. At the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California, we see officers who are experienced combat veterans but cannot write a tactical order because many units use an abbreviated concept of operations format in combat. There are also those who try to lead their units by themselves because they do not feel they have the time to train subordinates on administrative skills. These officers are not as successful as those who have built a team. All leaders must continuously reflect on their competence in the art and science aspects of their profession, identifying their strengths and weaknesses and continuing their extended education.

“Developing leaders is a priority mission in command and organizations.”²

—Field Manual (FM) 7-21.13, The Soldiers Guide

Reception and Integration

During the first interaction with new subordinate leaders, it is critical to establish required standards and performance measures. These leaders operate and integrate new information at different levels. One of the strengths of the military profession is that subordinate leaders are not identical—they are individuals. The initial counseling gives them very specific guidance, the commander’s expectations of them, and what they should expect from the commander. This may sound basic but, in eight years of commissioned service, only one rater gave me a complete initial counseling. This, of all counseling, is probably the most critical. To help organize that first counseling session, the following can serve as primary categories:

Leadership

“An officer is responsible for everything his organization does or fails to do.” That statement sets the tone a young leader needs to focus his or her perspective. Articulate the

left and right limits (probably very narrow at first), and make it plain that development will bring greater latitude. Remind him or her of the obligation to respectfully provide input to decisions and encourage discussion with you. How many commanders have an “open door” whose threshold no one dares to cross?

“If as an officer one does not tell blunt truths or create an environment where candor is encouraged, then [he has done himself] and the institution a disservice.”³

—Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates

“An engineer’s ability to analyze tactical problems and identify solutions can be a great asset to a brigade combat team or battalion staff.”

Professional Ethics

A single unethical decision by a leader can do great damage to a unit and have strategic impact. The scandal at Abu Ghraib is a reminder that ethical failure by a small group can have disastrous consequences. Spend time talking with subordinates about the relationship between officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs). Explain to young officers the importance of that cooperative relationship and how to approach the NCO who has a decade or more of military experience. The relationship between a platoon leader and platoon sergeant is different from the relationship between a commander and a first sergeant. Adjusting perspective does not always come naturally. The first meeting between a platoon leader and his platoon sergeant is not covered in any class during the Basic Officer Leadership Course. Raters and senior raters have a professional obligation to guide their subordinates to successfully navigate their first meeting with their NCOs. They should be armed with accurate assessments of the strengths and limitations of their future NCO partners.

Professional Development

Engineer officers’ career paths can be quite diverse and offer little opportunity to specialize in any one field. An engineer may spend time as a lieutenant, operating a quarry as part of an engineer battalion, and time as a captain, rated by infantry officers while assigned to an infantry unit. Engineer officers need mentorship by field grade officers. Institutional course success is not always an indicator of performance or expertise. The first tactical order that I wrote as an infantry battalion planner was returned by my battalion commander with the comment, “This is an F.” He then took the time to walk me through his

interpretation of a tactical order, and I began to realize the necessity of understanding how the commander visualizes the battlefield and processes information. For the next three years, with the help of my seniors, I learned as much as I could. The learning curve was steep and unforgiving.

Eight-Step Training Model. When first assessing a new officer, questions about doctrine and tactics should be posed to determine the officer's level of institutional knowledge. Then the officer should be assigned tasks that support his or her education and have an applicable outcome. The eight-step training model is a useful template; having a subordinate design ranges and produce the orders required to execute them is an effective training exercise. Not only does it require the officer to understand how to reserve the land, request the ammunition, arrange transportation, and organize support architecture, but it also requires research in Department of the Army Pamphlet 385-63, *Range Safety*, and understanding surface danger zones. Producing direct-fire control measures furthers understanding of the effects of weapon systems. Then the officer must work with NCOs to develop a comprehensive training plan—supported by doctrine—to meet the standards for executing a live-fire exercise. At the end of a single range design exercise, a baseline of knowledge is established or reinforced and the new officer knows the required standards for successful mission accomplishment. Young leaders may someday have an assignment independent of a company or battalion in combat.

"It took a long time to make senior officers realize that if they did not make junior officers go through the process in which they alone must make decisions or make recommendations on which decisions must be based, they hadn't done much."⁴

—General of the Army George C. Marshall

Doctrine. This is the foundation for all Army operations, and engineers will be asked to perform a variety of missions to the highest standards. An understanding of basic doctrine and how to apply the fundamentals to the decisionmaking process is essential. Develop a training plan in your subordinates' counseling to reinforce the troop-leading procedures. If a young leader is able to organize his thoughts within this system, it will enable effective time management. Also, understanding how to effectively use doctrinal terms is imperative. Subordinates should understand the need to become well versed in FM 1-02, *Operational Terms and Graphics*, and should not be allowed to speak in nondoctrinal terms. Speaking the language is a hallmark of credibility in the engineer profession.

History and Professional Writing. These have critical applications in professional development. The Army has a broad professional reading list that is challenging in its size and scope. Many of the books are mainstream and written before 1990. With current time limitations, topics worth studying should be specified. Ways to aid in identifying applicable texts are to seek the advice of senior leaders or to browse university courses about expected

deployment locations and to scan their required reading lists. A timeline and structure for professional discussions should be established. Developing creative solutions to tactical problems requires that leaders have not only a solid base in doctrine but also in military history and professional writing.

Personal Development. It is critical for new leaders in our profession to look the part. Physical fitness is imperative. The first time a young officer is challenged by his subordinates is often at physical training when the young sappers try to determine the new leader's physical strengths and weaknesses. Poor performance there can be a challenge to the leader's credibility in other areas. Establishing goals and training plans for the new leader in terms of fitness should be part of initial counseling. In the same session, new leaders should be reminded that not looking the part can undermine professional credibility. Personal ethics must be part of this briefing as well, since an officer's personal life is always subject to scrutiny. Compromising ethical standards can result in a loss of professional credibility and effectiveness.

Basic Skills and Development. Counseling new officers quarterly is less than optimal, especially for junior lieutenants, who need to be counseled monthly. Counseling does not always have to be formal. Taking a knee with subordinates during a field training exercise is just as effective. Pick two or three traits to emphasize and concentrate on them. It is better to serve with a young officer who is an expert at a few things rather than one who is mediocre at many.

At the National Training Center, we see rotational companies ten times a year. Our team covers the full spectrum of engineer operations—from sapper companies to vertical construction companies. Fundamental skills often absent in junior officers are the ability to produce written orders to convey intent, understand how to supervise their platoon, and anticipate requirements. On the first point, without a company-level order, there is little chance that the platoon leader will generate his own. Commanders should be prepared to issue orders according to FM 5-0, *Army Planning and Orders Production*, from the first warning order to the final operations order. Enforcing this format will enable junior leaders to conduct troop-leading procedures with greater effectiveness and provide them a logical format to aid in parallel planning. The second point can be a sensitive topic. Young lieutenants and captains are also inexperienced leading in the positions they are assigned. There is often trepidation on their part to make decisions or give direction for fear of not knowing how to do it. Finally, young officers should be coached to anticipate requirements. This comes from a few months of working together, getting to know each other professionally, and understanding the commander's intent for small-unit operations in the operational environment.

Advanced Development and Sustainment. Once the initial training and coaching of subordinates is complete, commanders then have the obligation to prepare them

for their next duty position. Many lieutenants and junior captains are commanding companies without the benefit of having attended the Engineer Captains Career Course. When I attended that course, I thought the amount of time spent on staff operations was excessive—until I served on a battalion staff. Young leaders deserve to prove they can perform their duties and are prepared for future staff positions. Always holding subordinates to the highest standards ensures that they present themselves and the Engineer Branch in the best possible light.

Sustainment can simply be expressed as mentorship. This relationship can be established and maintained for many years to come. The military mentor relationship starts with initial counseling and continues throughout the careers of both officers.

Develop a Plan

Ineffective time management should not be allowed to drive our subordinate leader development plans. It is imperative to take the time to identify the strengths and weaknesses of subordinates, then develop a deliberate plan of action to prepare them for their path ahead. This is a commander's professional obligation, and young sappers deserve the best we can provide.



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Endnotes

¹Forrest C. Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Education of a General*, 1880-1939, Viking Press, New York, New York, p. 250.

²Field Manual 7-21.13, *The Soldier's Guide*, 15 October 2003.

³Robert Gates, "Reflections on Leadership," *Parameters: US Army War College Quarterly*, Volume XXXVIII, Issue No. 2, Summer 2008, p. 11.

⁴Pogue, p. 100.